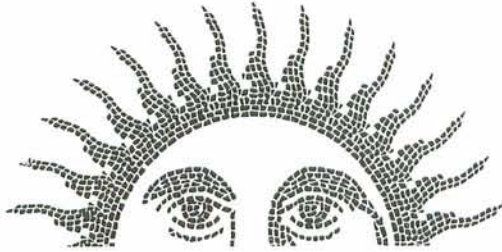


METAPHORS OF MY FAITH



By Elbert Eugene Peck

RECENTLY, ALAN CANFIELD and I were discussing the traditional symposium session Pillars of My Faith where panelists share their spiritual journeys. Some call it an intellectual testimony meeting, others raw soul bearing. When Peggy Fletcher Stack originally conceived the panel in 1983, she hoped it would be a theological and philosophical exploration of the core tenets that support one's belief, that animate one's life and theology. Some speakers have fulfilled this analytical task with distinction, such as BYU philosopher Chauncey Riddle's "What a Privilege to Believe!" (SUNSTONE 12:3) in which he systematically outlined his beliefs in an inspiring and obviously life-long integration of his heart and mind.

More often the Friday evening session results in weaving belief-changing experiences into spiritual journeys. I find solace, hope, and company that, at core, our intellectual religious deliberations are rooted in individual religious experiences.

For some, the pillars metaphor proves helpful. Kathleen Flake explored which of her beliefs were merely ornamental pillars and which were the load-bearing ones that supported her faith (SUNSTONE 13:5). Others supplant the pillars. Mary Bradford explored the "pillows" of her faith on which she rests her head (in *Leaving Home* [Signature Books, 1987], 59). Elouise Bell preferred feminine "arches" (SUNSTONE 15:5). Faith for Emma Lou Thayne is a "great sea" of friends, family, and Church that buoy her up (SUNSTONE 16:2). A natural, diverse meadow structures Lavina Fielding Anderson's faith (SUNSTONE 14:5).

"What metaphor best depicts your faith?" Alan asked, dragging our heretofore comfortable, abstract conversation into the irk-

somely personal. But, as males, we avoided self-revelation with playful nominations for each other—the gargoyles of my faith, the traffic jams of my faith, the black holes, the hormones, the pinball games, fast foods, sitcoms, bulletin boards, CD players. . . . Yet his question stuck with me, and this spring as I walked to work I searched for metaphors to convey my beliefs. That task is difficult, revealing, and rewarding. What image illuminates my relationship with Christ, my social spirituality, the quiet, on-going dialogue between my lived life and God, the moments of ecstasy, and the fluctuating framework of theological construction?

For example, prompted by sun-lit sprays from the Church Office Building fountain, one day I meditated upon the rainbow—a radiant, transcendent, ephemeral event that retains its brilliance even as a memory. In some ways, my faith is like that: technicolor shimmers of spirit that sustain me through longer black-and-white stretches. But that image apprehended only one small feature of my belief, so I kept searching.

One metaphor I kept returning to was that of a river. My faith is like the course of a river, sometimes surging, other times slow but deep. At times my river of beliefs snakes freely through a flat meadow, its unbounded, meandering path constantly changing. Other times it cascades through layered, grand canyons carved by countless generations before. Deep in those set canyons of tradition my faith follows the awesome routes saints and pilgrims pioneered. Sometimes I am grateful for the hard cutting already done, other times I cut against the restrictive cliffs in eroding dissent. Still other times my faith is but a shallow summer rivulet haunted by the towering traditions that

determine my feeble flow. Then there are the horseshoe river bends now abandoned by new, shorter routes, permanent reminders of where my faith-river once coursed but no longer does. My river of faith continues through impotent nights and indulgent days, colored by the moods of spring, summer, winter, and fall but at root independent of them. Nourished by others' streams and by God's rain, my faith also nourishes others. I enjoy exploring this metaphor because it celebrates the journey (another favorite metaphor) and the diversity of my experiences. It allows me to revisit and incorporate many aspects of my life into one rich image. Still, this metaphor does not completely satisfy. It is too passive and doesn't reflect back my passionate quest for God and religious community, two crucial pillars of my faith.

"Hikes of my faith" profitably explores the deliberate and taxing journey aspects of belief, and, if the mountain climb is with a group, it incorporates the individual vs. community dynamic. Like Parley Pratt's, my faith is also like the breaking sunrise, whose brilliant light gives shadowy objects clear definition, and through the sun (Son) I see and experience life.

Countless other images, large and small, came to mind while sauntering through the streets of Salt Lake: My faith is like unto a growing tree with spreading branches and deepening roots (thank you Alma and, yes, Barbara Walters). With banyon or quaking aspen trees our interconnected social spirituality is included. There is also the tapestry of my faith, and the mural of my faith.

I am vulnerably aware how these metaphors, although illuminating, neglect many of the load-bearing pillars disclosed by this venture, and even together they portray incorrectly my complicated faith. Ultimately all metaphors and language are incomplete. But I have been blessed by this exploration and invite interested readers to join the quest and share their metaphors of faith in letters to the magazine.

Robert Frost said all language and thinking is metaphorical. His favorites were natural images—trees, snow, walls, night. I'll continue my ponderings. Each new image crafted to celebrate one aspect of my faith will distill yet another I had missed, prompting yet one more quest. Similarly, Jesus reeled off a succession of metaphors to describe different aspects of the kingdom of heaven—sown seeds, mustard grains, hidden treasures, pearl searches, netted fish (see Matthew 13). The examined religious life is a life of continual redefinition, of *failed but fruitful* attempts to capture in words and images that elusive but real something only our hearts know. ☞